KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension Wildcat District

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Bagworms: Taking Out the Trash

Bagworms are a serious tree pest, but they often go unnoticed until fall. Now is a great time to start treating for bagworms.

Right now, the most concerning bagworms are the larval stage that is growing and traveling. They emerge from female bagworm bags, which carry the eggs over winter. The newly hatched larvae will spin a line of silk to catch the wind, allowing them to travel to new trees. 'Ballooning,' as it is called, is the main way bagworms spread.

While they're still young, bagworms are susceptible to both contact and ingested insecticides. The usual recommendations will contain either spinosad or Bt. Bt is short for Bacillus thuringiensis, usually of the 'kurstaki' subspecies. Both of these insecticides are derived from soil bacteria. Other control options include synthetic pyrethroids or acephate, but these pose greater risks to other insects and humans. Pyrethroids are especially harmful to bees and fish. This is why the mindful use of insecticides is important.

Good coverage of the tree and repeated applications improve bagworm control. While they are emerging now, it can be a prolonged period, as they emerge and balloon in waves. Once bagworm females reach maturity, they tend to stop eating, reducing their intake of the chemical. In late summer and fall, bagworms are noticeable enough to pluck by hand. While this won't protect a forest, it can remove any leftover bagworms on a few trees. Plucking bagworms and placing them in a bucket of soapy water (1fluid ounce of soap per gallon of water) is a hands-on approach to control.

They can affect many tree species, but are usually most damaging to evergreens. Evergreens don't push out fresh growth from limbs like deciduous trees do. Also, a single female can harbor hundreds of eggs. Control of their numbers is important.

However, the trash gets taken out, these bags have got to go. Be on the lookout now, and don't forget about them until the tree is covered.

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